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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 000123

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SUBJECT: TAJIK COURTS EXTORT, JAIL ISLAMISTS AND THEIR PLUMBER

REF: 09 DUSHANBE 95

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Tajik courts issued stiff sentences to individuals convicted of membership in two outlawed Muslim fundamentalist organizations as members of a third banned group stand trial. Dushanbe city court convicted seven individuals who follow the banned Salafiya movement, although the convicted men deny their membership in an organized movement. Khujand city court convicted 10 members of the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement for "attempting to overthrow the government." An additional 92 members of the Muslim fundamentalist missionary group, Jamaati Tabligh, stand trial in Dushanbe and Khatlon Oblast. Court officials have solicited bribes from family members of the accused Jamaati Tabligh members in exchange for acquittal or lesser sentences. Though mainstream Muslim leaders support the convictions of Salafi and Hizb ut-Tahrir members, they view Tabligh members as harmless missionaries and have called for their release. END SUMMARY

DUSHANBE COURT: 5-7 YEARS FOR THE SALAFI SEVEN

¶2. (C) On January 23, a Dushanbe city court sentenced seven individuals to prison terms ranging from five to seven years for membership in the banned Salafiya "movement" and "incitement of religious and national hostility". The men were arrested in July 2009, when government security forced raided an unregistered mosque. Poloff met two associates of the convicted "Salafis" in a small Dushanbe mosque on January 27 to discuss the case. Both were middle-class, well-spoken, and claimed government links. Hoji Eraj, whose father works for the Ministry of Culture, is a young, unemployed imam. He escaped arrest during the 2009 raid because he was not at the mosque that day. He said the men attending the mosque had never called for jihad, criticized the government, or engaged in illegal activities. "Anvar" said he works for the President's Administration and is an Islamic scholar. His brother was sentenced to five years. Both denied the existence of a separate Salafi movement and identified themselves as "People of the Sunni Community".

¶3. (C) According to Eraj and Anvar, court officials questioned the accused men regarding their manner or praying and their view of other Muslim groups, but did not present evidence of anti-government activities. The judge questioned why the men loudly exclaimed "Amen" during prayer (rather than whispering "Amen" per common Tajik practice), wore short pants and shirtsleeves to mosques, and entered mosques without wearing the traditional Tajik hat. Court officials also asked the defendants where they believed God exists (everywhere or in one

place) to ascertain whether their doctrine is Salafiya. Anvar said court officials gave the defendants little opportunity to testify. At one point, the imam of the group, Eshoni Sirojiddin, interrupted the proceedings and yelled, "You are asking the defendant about the length of his pants!"

¶4. (SBU) Eshoni Sirojiddin was sentenced to seven years in prison. Sirojiddin, known for his abrasive style of preaching, has denounced Shiites as "kafirs" (infidels), and regularly quarreled with Tajikistan's moderate Muslim establishment. When visiting a mainstream mosque, he chided male worshippers that allowing a wife to be in public without a hijab is the same as allowing her to commit adultery. He condemned the most respected Imam in the country, Eshoni Nurridin, and the head of the Islamic Revival Party, Muhiddin Kabiri, as friends of "kafirs", because of their positive statements towards Shia Muslims. Ismaili Shia make up the majority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, which was controlled by the opposition during the Civil War, and the government and the moderate religious establishment have sought to suppress anti-Shia rhetoric to prevent a revival of conflict.

¶5. (C) Eraj said that one of the men convicted was a plumber who happened to be working at the home of Mullo Shahobiddin, deputy Imam of the raided mosque when police arrived. He said the plumber was unaffiliated with the group, but convicted as a "Salafi" and sentenced to five years. Regarding Sirojiddin's quarrels with the traditional clergy, Eraj said "that was a dispute between the elders, between people much wiser than us." Members of the group did not support any action to harm the Shia, but sought to correct what they viewed as an incorrect practice of Islam. He posited that the traditional clergy felt

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threatened by Sirojiddin's "rising star".

TRADITIONAL CLERGY SUPPORT SALAFI CONVICTIONS

¶6. (SBU) The Imam-Khatib of Varzob District, Domullo Sayido, approved of the arrest and prosecution of the Salafis and said that the movement risked creating "a split in society. They don't accept any interpretation of Islam except their own." He accused the Salafi movement of sparking fights among members of Muslim worshippers because of their unorthodox praying style, particularly the loud pronunciation of "Amen". Sayido said most Muslim clergy welcomed the verdicts and expressed surprise that the sentences weren't longer. "Society has turned against them and there are very few left who support them." Imam Sayido would not describe the Salafis as "terrorists" or "extremists", admitting "it is true that they never called anyone to violence."

¶7. (SBU) The government did not arrest Muhammadi Rahmatullo, generally acknowledged to be the founder and leader of the Tajik Salafiya movement. When Muhammadi Rahmatullo and his followers began attracting public interest in 2005, the government supported them and offered the group space in the Dushanbe Central mosque. Religious observers have speculated that the government's initial tacit support for Salafis had been based on the group's usefulness as a counterweight to the IRPT and to the traditional Muslim leadership (Reftel). With Eshoni Sirojiddin's controversial statements, the government may have decided that he and his followers had gone too far. Sayido said the State Committee for National Security infiltrated and monitored Sirojiddin's "Salafi" mosque for six months prior to the 2009 raid.

COURT OFFICIALS SHAKE DOWN JAMAATI TABLIGH MEMBERS

¶8. (SBU) Ninety-two members of the banned Jamaati Tabligh Muslim fundamentalist missionary group face charges of "membership in an extremist organization" (56 in Dushanbe City Court, 36 in Khatlon Oblast). Members travelled to mosques and homes to tell Tajiks to pray the "Namaz" and wear traditional Muslim attire. The group received funding from India and Pakistan. The government banned Jamaati Tabligh in 2006. In April 2009, the government raided a mosque and arrested 123 men accused of membership in Jamaati Tabligh.

¶9. (SBU) Badriddin Sulymonov, a Tajik businessman living in Almaty whose brother is standing trial, said court officials demanded bribes from the moment of the arrests. Suspects who paid between 2,000 and 5,000 dollars were released or charged with lesser crimes. The state prosecutor requested sentences of two to six years imprisonment. Family members expected verdicts on January 28, but the judge adjourned the trial to review the cases. Sulymov reported that court officials, including the judge and prosecutor, demanded nearly 30,000 dollars for his brother's acquittal. Sulymov paid the money and expects that his brother will be released with a fine. "Why do you think they (the court officials) adjourned for the day, instead of reading the verdicts? They need more time to gather their harvest (bribes)."

JAMAATI TABLIGH: JUST GOOD KIDS TEACHING PEOPLE TO PRAY

¶10. (SBU) Traditional clergy and influential Muslim leaders broadly support Jamaati Tabligh's activities and consider them peaceful missionaries unfairly categorized as extremists. IRPT leader Kabiri and influential Islamic/Political leader Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda have called for their removal from the extremist black list. Turajonzoda publicly called for the inclusion of Jamaati Tabligh members in President Rahmon's October 2009 amnesty. IRPT leader Kabiri asked, "What is their wrongdoing? That they are far from politics and didn't know that Tajikistan banned them in 2006? Right away we employ repressive measures instead of explaining to them that their organization is illegal here." Varzob Imam Sayido concurred

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that mainstream Muslim leaders supported Jamaati Tabligh and called for members to be released.

HIZB UT-TAHRIR: TEN GET LONG TERMS IN SUGHD

¶11. (SBU) On January 26, Khujand city court sentenced 10 members of Hizb ut-Tahrir to 8-15 years for "inciting religious enmity" and "attempting to overthrow the government". Most mainstream Muslim leaders in Tajikistan view Hizb ut-Tahrir, which calls for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate, as a foreign, "Uzbek" movement. They generally support the ban on Hizb ut-Tahrir, which they view, like the Salafiya movement, as a foreign, divisive, ideology. The movement's support base is in the Sughd Oblast, but has not appeared to be a major political force. The "Salafiya" movement is more widely discussed in the media and appears to have greater influence among Tajik youth.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: The government's crackdown on "extremist groups" stems from its fear of Islamic radicalism from Afghanistan and knee-jerk repression of religious practices that it views as foreign, such as the loud exclamation of "Amen" during prayers. Though anti-Shia statements made by the Eshoni Sirojiddin were reprehensible, the government presented no evidence that he or his followers were members of a Salafiya movement or that such an organized following even exists in the country. The government has rather used the charge of "Salafism" to jail imams, such as Eshoni Sirojiddin, whose sermons created social discord, or Muslims whose worship practices the government equates with radicalism. The corrupt handling of the Jamaati Tabligh trial further erodes the government's credibility in managing religious affairs. The traditional clergy have so far given the government a free hand to detain members of groups they considered heterodox, but may take issue with the imprisonment of a large number of Jamaati Tabligh missionaries, whom they support. Post will monitor prominent Muslim political and religious leaders' reactions to the likely convictions of those Tabligh members who can't buy an acquittal. END COMMENT
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